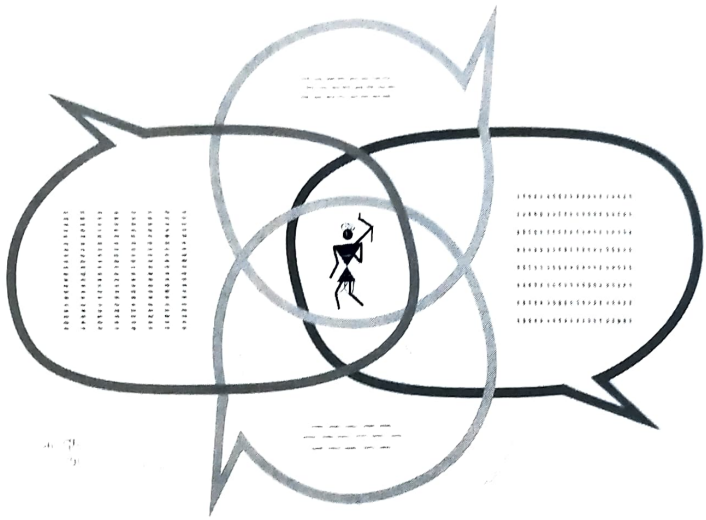
Reform, the Indian way

My view is that India is too much of a democracy to mirror a China model. This has been misconstrued to mean we have 'too much democracy'

AMITABH KANT



C R Sasikumar

IF ANYONE involved with governing for the past three decades introspects, they will see that difficult decisions on structural reforms are what have been missing for truly transformative change. It is troubling that support for initiatives that democratise the daily lives of all of us is misinterpreted to mean something that was never intended. *The Indian Express* is a newspaper that stands for democracy and celebrates journalism of courage, independent journalism and freedom of speech. I have been a loyal reader of it since my school days, relying on its reportage of the Emergency and beyond. Let me categorically say this — each and every Indian, including me, is and should be proud that we belong to the largest democracy in the world.

John Stuart Mill defines democracy as "government by discussion". We are a proud democracy that ensures checks and balances, a bicameral structure, and a voice for every citizen. From the perspective of structural reforms, it means that consensus needs to be built into our processes. Reforms require the buy-in of every stakeholder and therefore they take longer than in the China model. This is factual — it is not partisan, it is not anti-democratic, nor is it overtly critical. Also factual is that this government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown the intent and the drive to bring in structural reforms across sectors. Stating a fact does not make one partisan, and one should not be mischaracterised for doing so.

From working with fishermen in Kerala, to the "God's Own Country" initiative, to the Incredible India campaign, to ease of doing business, and all the work I've done across sectors, I have operated optimally in a democracy that I love. The incomplete and out of context extrapolation of my speech inferred that it implied that, "to see reforms as adversarial to the democratic process is to foreclose spaces for negotiation, innovation, and dialogue," ('Reform, as per Mr Kant: By framing it as adversarial to democratic process, Niti Aayog CEO does disservice to democracy and reform', IE, December 10, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/reform-as-per-mr-amitabh-kant-7098586/). The irony of this statement stands out. At the dialogue, I was speaking about the multifaceted layers of negotiation and consensus building that were required to bring forth innovation in policies such as the Production Linked Incentive Scheme. Our objective has been to create global champions from India.

Over the last seven months, the NITI Aayog along with ministries across the Government of India, industry representatives, global and Indian academicians and sectoral experts has deliberated, discussed and conceptualised the intricacies of this transformative scheme. As the pandemic impacted our lives, it became critically important to simultaneous prioritise "lives and livelihoods". In this context, it was pertinent to ensure that the allocation of resources is efficient and adequately determined to enable maximum value creation for the entire society. It is our inclusive processes and institutions which enabled us to successfully create consensus towards deciding the scale of incentive for the entire scheme (over $26 billion), select the 10 sectors covering cutting edge technology, design the incentives towards rewarding incremental production, and configure the size and scale of the scheme to ensure benefits accrue maximally in society. This is nothing short of exemplary and that was the focus of my speech.

The editorial inappropriately takes my speech given in a different context and transfixes it to the current agriculture reforms. Since agricultural reforms have been brought up in the editorial, let's look at all the consultations and democratic processes observed in India when formulating these landmark bills. The editorial states that farm reforms were passed "with little or no evidence of consultation". The trinity of legislation to facilitate contract farming, remove price restrictions and boost open trade have been the culmination of comprehensive, far-reaching and wide-ranging stakeholder consultations over the last two decades. A plethora of commissions, reports, task forces, model legislation, regulations and rules have suggested these reforms.

The Expert Committee Report, Ministry of Agriculture in 2001, the Report of the Inter-Ministerial Taskforce on Agricultural Marketing Reforms in 2002, the Model Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee Act of 2003, the National Commission on Farmers between 2004-2006, the Model APMC Rules drafted in 2007, the Working Group on Agriculture Production from 2010, a Report of the Committee of State Ministers in 2013, the NITI Aayog Task Force on Agriculture Development in 2016, Ashok Dalwai's Doubling Farmers Income Committee Report of 2017, the Model Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing Act of 2017, the Model Contract Farming Act in 2018, the High Powered Committee of Chief Ministers recently in 2019, amongst others, have advocated these reforms in part and full. To say that there weren't any consultations before bringing these reforms dismisses the efforts of every such intervention.

At this stage, cognisant of the right direction which had been indicated and suggested over the course of these efforts, displaying paramount political determination and administrative will, these reformative bills were passed in Parliament. Even now, as with the "stalemate", several senior central ministers have been immersed in dialogue with the farmer representatives. The same editorial also notes "on farm reform, it could be argued, in fact, that it is inadequate democracy, not too much of it, the concentration of power instead of its dispersion, that has contributed to the present stalemate." On the aspect of inadequate democracy, the irony really lies in the fact that these reformative Acts will democratise the opportunity structure for 43 per cent of our 500 million plus strong workforce engaged in agriculture and the lives of millions will advance towards significant well-being as a result of these acts.

It has been a long held view of renowned agricultural experts such as M S Swaminathan, Ashok Gulati, Ashok Dalwai and Ramesh Chand that we need to decrease input cost inefficiencies, ensure better price signalling, ascertain better price realisation for farmers at the grassroots level, minimise post-harvest losses and also strategise new avenues to aid income generation for farmers. The entire agriculture value chain, "beej se bazaar", across storage, finance, transport, aggregation, and marketing has become a fertile ground for farmers, entrepreneurs and industry to collaborate and cooperate for innovations which will unleash productivity in the sector. To the credit of the editorial, it does get one aspect **right, when it notes that the reforms are in "the right direction."**

Let me reiterate — **there is nothing ambiguous about what I said. The entire conversation is available in the public domain — in fact the link to the seminar is here** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxx2Rx9oWXI&feature=youtu.be.

In this social media absorbed ecosystem we dispense with depth and discussion at the expense of brevity, but in that brevity we dispense with rationality. What I said and what has been ascribed to me are poles apart. My statement, with relevant portions, is that India is too much of a democracy to mirror a China model. How this has been misconstrued to mean we have "too much democracy" is both myopic and idiosyncratic. Mostly, it is a groundless twisting of a factual statement to make it palatable to partisan misinterpretation. I would much rather the focus be on the overall road to Atma Nirbhar and my observation that structural reforms like the PLI "require a very hard-headed, ground-level approach, which is being attempted for the first time in India". India is at the cusp of major growth through these structural reforms. We should be proud of these achievements. I, for one, most definitely am.

The author is CEO, NITI Aayog. Views are personal

DEAR EDITOR, I DISAGREE

A column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

The editorial inappropriately takes my speech given in a different context and transfixes it to the current agriculture reforms. Since agricultural reforms have been brought up in yesterday's editorial, let's look at all the consultations and democratic processes observed in India when formulating these landmark bills. The editorial states that farm reforms were passed 'with little or no evidence of consultation'. The trinity of legislation to facilitate contract farming, remove price restrictions and boost open trade have been the culmination of comprehensive, far-reaching and wide-ranging stakeholder consultations over the last two decades.